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CIVIL AND POLITICAL RIGHTS, INCLUDING THE QUESTIONS OF: FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

Written statement* submitted by the Reporters sans frontières international, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[18 January 2002]

*This written statement is issued, unedited, in the language(s) received from the submitting non-governmental organization(s).

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ZIMBABWE: The independent press harassed

In 2001, Zimbabwe became one of the country that most stifled free press in the whole of African continent. Twenty (20) local journalists were arrested and three foreign correspondents were expulsed from the country. The President and the government in Harare are harassing both local and foreign journalists with impunity. There are continuous threats and arrests, and the independent press is finding it more and more difficult to play its role of informing public opinion. President Robert Mugabe is listed by RSF as one of the thirty nine (39) "predators" of press freedom in the world.

Throughout the year 2001, the president and his government uttered shocking comments against the press. In September for instance, the Minister for Communication Jonathan Moyo accused the *BBC* and the British dailies, The Guardian and the Daily Telegraph of "working for British intelligence services". He added that "in the interest of law and order, competent authorities will crack down on some well known individuals in order to curb the law of the jungle they are trying to create in the country through the media."

The *Daily News*, the only independent daily paper in the country has been subjected to real harassment by the authorities. Its editor, Geoffrey Nyarota has been arrested several times in the course of the year. The government and the ruling party, the Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) launched a series of law suits against the paper, demanding huge compensation "for damages caused by the paper" aimed at stifling. The harsh economic situation and the violence pitting white farmers against war veterans have only helped the government to step up its repression against the most critical newspapers in the country.

Already at the end of June, the EU ministers of foreign affairs expressed their concern about the deteriorating political situation in Zimbabwe. They called on Zimbabwean authorities to uphold the rule of law, freedom of the press and the independence of the judiciary. Days earlier, the US government accused Zimbabwean authorities of forbidding the press to report on what was really going on in the countryside.

A Bill on free access to information is now being debated in the Zimbabwean parliament. If it becomes law, it will forbid foreign journalists from working in the country. The Bill also makes it clear that all media professionals will have to be granted authorisation by a special commission to be set up by the government, before being allowed to work. The authorisation will be renewable after one year.

On the night of 27 and 28 January 2001, a bomb exploded at the premises sheltering the *Daily News*,printing offices in Southerton, a suburb of Harare. Nobody was hurt but the printing equipment was very much damaged, rendering the publication of the paper very difficult to go ahead as usual. Nobody claimed responsibility for the attack. On 22 April 2000, another bomb exploded on the ground-floor of the *Daily News*,headquarters. On 28 January 2001, hundreds of copies of the Daily News were consigned to the flames in the capital Harare, by militants of Zanu-PF, the ruling party, protesters hostile to the government also destroyed hundreds of copies of the *Herald* and *Sunday Mail*, two pro-government newspapers. On 3 February, police forbade a demonstration by journalists aimed at expressing their support for the *Daily News*, to take place.

On 17 February, Joseph Winter, a BBC correspondent in Harare received an expulsion order from immigration services on the ground that the minister for information had changed the rules governing journalits,accreditation. The following day, unidentified people tried to enter the journalist,s home, who, consequently, took refuge at a diplomat,s house. Joseph Winter,s

work permit had just been renewed and would have expired in February 2002. But the journalist found himself facing an order to leave the country within 24 hours. Mercedes Sayagues, a correspondent with the South African weekly *Mail & Guardian* was asked not to return to Zimbabwe while she was in South Africa for a two-day visit. She was refused re-entry at Harare International Airport on 17 February. At the end she was allowed to join her daughter, provided that she would leave the country within 24 hours. "What was done to me and to my daughter is illegal, unreasonable and unnecessary, but it is not worse than what is being done to the Zimbabwean people. Here is a government which is ready to trample on the rule of law, destroy the economy and violate human rights," Sayagues told AFP. On 19 February, Joseph Winter left Zimbabwe, and three days later, Mercedes Sayagues went back to South Africa.

On 14 August, at midnight, Geoffrey Nyarota, editor of *Daily news*, was arrested at his home by the police and taken to Harare central police station. The following day, three other members of the editorial team were also apprehended by the police for4 publishing an article entitled: "Police vehicles used in the farm looting". The D*aily News* contended in that report that ZANU_PF sympathisers and war veterans were using vehicles belonging to the police to loot and ransack farms belonging to the whites in the north-west of the country. The paper cited a white farmer as saying: "They stole the maize, took TV sets and any other electronic gadgets they could find and threw them into the swimming pool. The situation is terrible. Some of them are driving police cars." On the evening of 15 August, the four men were released under the orders of the High Court. They have been indicted for "publication of false information".

A week later, Basildon Peta, a correspondent for the British daily *The Independent*, revealed that his name was on the "black list" of journalists wanted by the authorities. On the 23rd, he was summoned by the police. The names of Geoffrey Nyarota, editor of the *Daily News*, Iden Wetherall, editor of the *Zimbabwe Independent*, Mark Chavunduka and Cornelius Nduna, editor-in-chief and news director of *The Standard* respectively, were also on the list. On 24 August, two UN special rapporteur, Asma Jahangir (looking into arbitrary executions) and Abid Hussain (overseeing freedom of opinion and of expression record in every country) expressed their concerns for the lives of these five journalists.